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Date: Tue, 24 Oct 2000 22:09:37 -0700  
To: Harold Varmus <varmus@mskcc.org>  
From: "Patrick O. Brown" <pbrown@cmgm.stanford.edu>  
Subject: More reasonable thoughts about Don Kennedy and Science

Hi Harold,

I've settled down and have some serious suggestions for talking to Don Kennedy:

First, this is an issue that calls for leadership that Don and Science are in a unique position to provide. AAAS is not a business, but an association whose members want it to provide enlightened leadership. Science has a window of opportunity to play a real leadership role here, in changing the way journals view the material they publish - in exchange for their role in publishing it they have a "lease" on it, but ultimately it belongs in the public domain. Don, if he chose to, could speak for Science and make this point eloquently, and many, if not most of the journals would follow. And I think it is highly unlikely that the members of AAAS value the many projects that Science revenues subsidize as much as they value the published record of scientific research.

Second, this is a business opportunity. To flip around Don's view: Science has a lot more to GAIN than any other journal! Science is in constant competition with Nature. Either Science or Nature will see this as an opportunity, and whoever takes it will raise their stature at the expense of the other. The small marginal risk of loss of subscriptions, which is hypothetical and dubious, would very likely be more than made up for by the shift of submissions, reviewer effort and maybe even subscriptions, from Nature and Cell to Science. And if they act decisively and soon, they will reap a huge harvest of positive publicity and good feeling from the scientific community and the public.

Third, there is a downside to a timid and equivocal or negative response. The direct downside is the loss of subscription revenue, submissions, and voluntary reviewing from the signers of the letter (more than 100 so far, and this is only the first wave from individual-to-individual grassroots distribution of the letter). The indirect downside is the loss of the same support from others who will see the implicit rejection of Science by many responsible leaders of the scientific community, as an excuse to send their papers elsewhere with their heads held high (avoiding the slow review process and the high rejection rate that they would face with Science). In addition there is the opportunity cost if Science misses the chance to play a leadership role, and instead appears to be reacting reluctantly to the scientific community's request, and following the lead of other journals.

Fourth, although it is easy to dismiss the suggestions of that intemperate hothead Pat Brown (I was a bit intemperate when I broached this suggestion to Don K. about 6 months ago), the signers of this letter include many of the most responsible and thoughtful members of the scientific community at Stanford (where this letter has passed from hand to hand, and received very strong and enthusiastic support from scientists who know very well what they are asking), and MIT, Harvard, Berkeley and UCSF. This is a foretaste of what is to come, as this letter disseminates to other institutions. These are not irresponsible Bolsheviks who are clamoring for the downfall of Science and the other journals. They are people who respect and value Science and the scientific societies, and include many leaders of those societies and editors of journals that have at least as much at risk as Science does. (See the current list below).

I'm sure these points are already obvious to you and that you could find even better arguments to make when you speak to Don. I think it would be a terrible mistake for him personally and for Science, if he were to drag his feet and seek shelter behind his accountants and bureaucrats rather than seizing the opportunity to be a real leader.

Pat